

UC Irvine
UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title
Courbet, incommensurate and emergent

Permalink
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9xb2k9gv>

Journal
Critical Inquiry, 40(2)

ISSN
0093-1896

Author
Herbert, JD

Publication Date
2014-12-01

DOI
10.1086/674118

Peer reviewed



Courbet, Incommensurate and Emergent

Author(s): James D. Herbert

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Winter 2014), pp. 339-381

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674118>

Accessed: 05/01/2014 15:29

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Critical Inquiry*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Courbet, Incommensurate and Emergent

James D. Herbert

The daubs crowding the canvases of Gustave Courbet, according to critical accounts of the day, gesture in two, potentially antithetical directions. Because they persist as physical traces of his method of painting, these signature patches of paint—thick, loose, larded on by brush or palette knife—bespeak the sensibility, perhaps even the soul, of the energetic artist who laid them on canvas. Simultaneously, owing to their resemblance when clustered together to sitter or landscape (though it is mostly the late landscapes that will concern us here, along with an extended concluding look at the enormous *Painter's Studio*), they also evoke the slices of reality they depict. This doubled operation of painterly representation activates both an autobiographical cause (in semiotic terms, an index) pointing toward the artist and a realist resemblance (semiotically, an icon) bearing a likeness to the world. The resulting interplay promises a grand synthesis whereby the mind and world can be brought into appropriate correspondence through the medium of art. The potent admixture was hardly attributed to Courbet alone. Indeed, the combination vested the corpulent brushstroke with perhaps the greatest ideological construct of the visual fine arts—by which I mean a dominant yet unexamined and unquestioned axiom underlying a substantial body of cultural thought over an extended period—at a time when Paris stood as the cultural capital of Europe, spanning in application from at least Eugène Delacroix's renditions of the exotic Orient at the beginning of the nineteenth century until Pablo Picasso's fundamental recasting of the meaning of technique at the beginning of the twentieth. That powerful idea maintained that the indi-

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Critical Inquiry 40 (Winter 2014)

© 2014 by The University of Chicago. 00093-1896/14/4002-0004\$10.00. All rights reserved.

vidual artist, liberated from the thematic expectations and technical protocols of established artistic institutions such as the Académie and the École des Beaux-Arts, could capture a segment of lived experience of the real world and claim it as his own.¹ Art critic and novelist Émile Zola provided the lapidary definition of painting under the aegis of this conceptual regime in his review of the salon of 1866: “A work of art is a corner of creation seen through a temperament.”² Courbet, active at a time when the felicitous conjunction of perceiving self and perceived world had already become an established critical convention, worked with a conspicuity of method that made his brushstrokes ideal vehicles for the conceit (Zola, in fact, immediately followed his definition with a discussion of Courbet’s contribution to the salon). Consequently, the painter from Ornans stood forth as an early exemplar of the ambitious French painter ascribed with something close to full artistic autonomy in control of his own world—a status underwritten, appropriately, by both biographical difference and geographic distance from Parisian artistic norms.

However, this ideological formulation depended in turn on an indispensable assumption: that artist, painting, and subject matter always remained, in some sense, commensurate with one another. How else could brushstroke serve as an adequate representation for both creative individual and depicted scene? Only once the three had been established as different enough to constitute distinct entities yet as similar enough to allow meaningful juxtaposition could the strands of representation (of whatever semiotic stripe: indexical cause, iconic resemblance, whatever) be drawn between them. The implied appropriation of sites by the artist, and by extension by the art audience, hangs on such assumed commensurability; Courbet’s interpretations of, say, the Normandy coast or of the forests of Franche-Comté as captured on his painterly canvases become ours for the

1. I am exploring this broader theme in a book manuscript nearing publication entitled *Brushstroke and Emergence: Courbet, Impressionism, Picasso*.

2. Émile Zola, “Mon Salon: Les Réalistes du salon,” *Mes Haines: Causeries littéraires et artistiques* (Paris, 1879), p. 307. The essay is also reprinted in Zola, *Écrits sur l’art*, ed. Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine (Paris, 1991), pp. 120–25.

JAMES D. HERBERT is professor of art history and cofounder of the PhD program in visual studies at the University of California, Irvine. He has published three books: *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics* (1992); *Paris 1937: Worlds on Exhibition* (1998); and *Our Distance from God: Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music* (2008). He is currently completing a book manuscript entitled *Brushstroke and Emergence: Courbet, Impressionism, Picasso*.

viewing. The real ideological work was performed not by any particular mapping of corresponding elements between entities—about that sort of thing endless debate raged as critics tussled over the strength and merits of the semiotic (pragmatic and semantic) filaments binding the three—but by the largely unquestioned acceptance of the possibility of meaningful connections linking artistic temperament, painted brushstroke, and realist subject matter. That commensurability may seem somewhat self-evident to many of us, but only because we ourselves are its ideological heirs. (During prerevolutionary centuries in France, by way of counterexample, royal patron and historical theme would have mirrored each other in commensurate glory, against which the persona, experience, and craft of the artist could not have hoped to offer even the most meager of measure.)

Any perspicacious analysis of Courbet's paintings, both for their own sake and as archetypes of the muscular brushstroke during the early adulthood of its illustrious century-long lifespan, need probe not only the strands of representation extending out from them—different ones proposed by different critics—but also this underlying assumption of commensurability shared by them all. A set of theoretical tools from outside the usual domain of art history, derived from the philosophy of mind and from the nascent science of complexity, will help elucidate the ways in which self, stroke, and subject matter can, paradoxically, neither be clearly distinguished each from the others nor flattened out to occupy the same ground upon which their commensurability can then be posited. The concept of emergence will prove especially useful in exploring how these three entities active in Courbet's paintings operate at incommensurate levels that, while hardly disconnected from each other, never allow the reduction of one to the status of necessary and sufficient *explicans* to the *explicandum* of the other. To be sure, this same dynamic pertains as well to the method I employ: I no more treat Courbet's painting as adequate illustrations of cognitive functions than I would pretend that the properties of emergence fully account for the paintings. (I make no spurious claims, for instance, that ideas about complexity from the twenty-first century were already somehow anticipated or prefigured within scientific thought of the nineteenth century, a gambit that would serve no purpose beyond conforming to existing scholarly protocols for establishing common ground for comparison between artist, artifact, and context.) At times, my analysis may take disconcerting leaps from, say, exacting descriptions of individual brushstrokes to general discussions of neurons and such. An approach that, even as it tests out possible connections between their different registers, recognizes an underlying lack of easy correspondence between historical artifacts and its own theoretical models stands a much better chance

of wresting open ideological assumptions of commensurability embedded in the past.

During one of his numerous excursions to the Normandy coast during the 1860s, Courbet presumably witnessed a waterspout, a tornado-like funnel of spray rising above the sea during a storm. The maritime oddity was to figure in a number of his subsequent canvases, including *The Waterspout, Etretat* of around 1870 (fig. 1). Despite the initial resemblance between painting and shoreline experience, the recalcitrant details of this painting (and other canvases like it) quickly frustrate any attempt to regard the image as straightforward ocean-meteorological reportage. Consider the piling-up of pigments in the lower left quadrant that is meant to represent the spray of foam thrown up by the crash of waves. In the depths of the picture at the right half of the first wave and with almost all of the second and third breakers, the application of paint achieves a degree of visual verisimilitude as Courbet's grays and whites replicate aquatic turbulence and aeration. These brushstrokes, many smooth and curved, resemble the actual curling shape of the watery crests. Yet the left, foremost section of the first wave bears little likeness to water; the artist, it would seem, pushed this patch of paint hard into the support with his palette knife. Its flattened expanse conforms to the surface of the picture plane rather than the slightly receding angle of the breaker, while the ruffled variegations along its edges capture more the viscosity of pigment-laden oil medium than the sparkling of ocean mists. Further to the right along the bottom edge of the picture, but also higher up where waves splash against rocks, Courbet's whites in like manner repeatedly flatten against the picture plane, quashing any illusion of depth, or congeal into clots and corrugations of paint. Indeed, it is as if these palette-knife curds build up momentum from the center of the picture to break, with the energy of art, from right to left into the leading crest of foremost wave, thereby overwhelming the thematic trajectory of brushed swells trying to push left to right. Throughout most of this expanse of curdled sea, the material of the rendering is simply too heavy and coarse to convincingly pass itself off as churning liquid.

By the 1860s, critics knew without a second thought how to interpret such conspicuous traces of forceful execution, and the habitual phrases practically wrote themselves. "My Courbet is simply a personality," wrote Zola in 1866, keen on *tempérament*. Recalling the painter's works from earlier decades, the critic enthused: "Stocky and vigorous, he had the raw desire to clutch real nature in his arms."³ (We will return later to the second

3. Zola, "Les Chutes," *Mes Haines*, p. 312; hereafter abbreviated "C."



FIGURE 1. Gustave Courbet, *The Waterspout, Eretat* (c. 1870). Oil on canvas, 54 × 80 cm. Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts. Photo: Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.

valence in Zola's formulation, that this extraordinary personality chose to embrace "real nature.") And if the works on display at the salon of 1866 did not fully live up to that earlier promise, it was because the pictures fell short of the person: "I hardly deny that *The Roe Deer's Shelter* [similar to *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* (fig. 5)] has great charm and much life; but [it] lacks that 'certain something' of power and will that is Courbet in his entirety" ("C," p. 313). Thick brushstrokes evoke Courbet firstly because he brought them into being; but paint and personality also shared resemblance, for such adjectives as *trapu* and *vigoureux* implicitly applied equally to both.

The critic Camille Lemonnier added to the argument by drawing out the biographical overtones of Courbet's preferred method of paint application. "The knife is the crude instrument of the manual laborer; it is without conscious thought, irresponsible, mechanical."⁴ The thickness of the paints records the extended period Courbet "labor[ed]" on the surface. Lemonnier's account builds on the notorious artist's uncouth public persona and political radicalism to carry the connotations of this simple studio tool deep into the territory of class. The palette knife marks Courbet as a man of *le peuple*. Such a characterization condescendingly imposes limitations, but also portends virtues. The marvels of pictorial illusion, perfected over centuries at the Académie and École and in Courbet's day best personified at the salon by the precise and polished Jean-Léon Gérôme, had developed to such a point that it indicated to many commentators an artistic overrefinement, even a capacity for duplicity. "All of that is a scintillating trap [*le miroir aux alouettes*]," complained the critic Louis Gallet in 1865 about Gérôme's painting, indirectly evoking the myth of Zeuxis and the duped birds; "it is the forgetting of true art, large and firm in its expression; it is thought sacrificed to minute detail; it is the triumph of routine technique [*métier*]."⁵ Courbet's pictures might be coarsely material, they might carry their message all on the surface, but for all that—perhaps because of all that—they maintain an aura of authenticity associated with good, honest labor. The palette knife and the bulky patches of paint it leaves behind guarantee the painter's sincerity because the worker-artist is sure to remain guileless. Critic Fernand Desnoyers insisted that "all forms of trickery are banished from Courbet's pictures."⁶

4. Camille Lemonnier, *G. Courbet et son œuvre* (Paris, [1878]), p. 62; hereafter abbreviated GC. The date appears on the title page as "M DCCC LXVIII," but 1868 cannot be correct because Lemonnier refers to the death of Courbet, which happened on the last day of 1877. I surmise that the printer omitted an X in the date on the title page.

5. Louis Gallet, *Salon de 1865: Peinture, sculpture* (Paris, 1865), p. 12.

6. Fernand Desnoyers, *Salon des refusés: La Peinture en 1863* (Paris, 1863), p. 21.

We could say, then, that brushstrokes, in some sense involving both the vestiges of labor and the recognition of temperamental similitudes, represent Courbet the man: his plebian and rustic origins, his loutish but ingenious persona, his authentic vigor. Yet this formulation, the grounds for decades of critical and art-historical evaluation, may presuppose an easy division between self and surface that a close examination of the processes of painting may well not bear out. Before we can consider the relation between sensibility and painted canvas, however, we must first reflect on the closer connection between the thoughts of the artist and the physical gestures he makes that leave those strokes as traces of his actions.

The standard Cartesian formulation of mind and body, John Haugeland points out (expanding on ideas earlier explored by Hubert L. Dreyfus), posits the two as separate components within a larger system, components distinguished from each other by great internal complexity and with a relatively simple “narrow-bandwidth” interface between them, through which thought becomes transduced (transmitted and translated) into action.⁷ As an illustrative comparison, Haugeland observes that we make sense of a television not by slicing it arbitrarily along regularly spaced planes but rather by distinguishing individual parts (picture tube, capacitor, resistor) that, while potentially internally complex to perform their specified function, nevertheless are connected to each other in relatively simple ways (wires). If mind and body are separate components in this manner, the mind must contain a conceptual model of the body, a representation of it, that it mentally manipulates to plan action before conveying instructions to the parts of the body corresponding to the model. This may be an accurate description when one is first learning a task or anticipating a carefully deliberated act. Learning to drive, for instance, you may consciously decide (or be instructed) that you will be placing your hands at 10:00 and 2:00, and in your mind you imagine that configuration, complete with an internal picture of your upper limbs, before you execute it. But this simply will not do as an account of the behaviors of a skilled expert.⁸ Experts have been habituated by many previous instances of sim-

7. John Haugeland, “Mind Embodied and Embedded” (1995), *Having Thought: Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 220; hereafter abbreviated “MEE.”

8. The transition from novice to expert is a topic examined by Dreyfus, and Haugeland quotes him directly: “Generally, in acquiring a skill—in learning to drive, dance, or pronounce a foreign language, for example—at first we must slowly, awkwardly, and consciously follow the rules. But then there comes a moment when we finally transfer control to the body [“can perform automatically” (Dreyfus, *What Computers Can’t Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason*, rev. ed. [New York, 1979], p. 248; quoted in “MEE,” p. 224)]. At this point we do not seem to be simply dropping these same rigid rules into unconsciousness; rather we seem to have picked up the muscular gestalt which gives our behavior a new flexibility and smoothness” (Dreyfus,

ilar actions to respond to stimuli by performing certain ingrained behaviors. They needn't think; they needn't plan the action; they needn't represent it. If I were to ask you, after you execute an automotive right turn (assuming you are no longer a novice and now possess driving competence as a habituated skill), where you had placed your hands during each step in the process, you simply could not tell me—and not because you've forgotten but because the placement of hands never occupied a place in your mental model to be remembered in the first place. The action TURNING RIGHT does not exist as a representation to be called up in the mind and sent off as fresh signals to the hands when occasion arises; it exists as a complex, "high-bandwidth" collection of neural pathways passing rapidly between brain and body, strengthened by each repeated use. Dreyfus writes (in conjunction with his brother Stuart, a mathematician and computer engineer): "As the active body acquires skills, those skills are 'stored,' not as representations in the mind, but as dispositions to respond to the solicitations of situations in the world."⁹ As a result, concludes Haugeland, "the activity of the [hands] should not be regarded as 'decoding neural messages', but rather as an integral part of the 'processing' that the brain and other neurons also contribute to. . . . The neural pathways from perception to action are high-bandwidth *all the way through*" ("MEE," pp. 226, 228).

What Computers Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason [New York, 1972], pp. 160–61; hereafter abbreviated WC). See also Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus, "Five Steps from Novice to Expert," *Mind over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer* (New York, 1986), pp. 16–51.

9. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus, "The Challenge of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment for Cognitive Science," in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, ed. Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber (New York, 1999), p. 103. The Dreyfuses are summarizing the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, but it is clear that they endorse this assessment themselves. In a parallel fashion, Antonio Damasio argues that the mind stores experience in emotions. "Different options for action and different future outcomes become associated with different emotions/feelings. By virtue of those associations, when a situation that fits the profile of a certain category is revisited in our experience, we rapidly and automatically deploy the appropriate emotions. . . . The emotional signal can operate entirely under the radar of consciousness. It can produce alterations in working memory, attention, and reasoning so that the decision-making process is biased toward selecting the action most likely to lead to the best possible outcome, given prior experience" (Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* [Orlando, Fla., 2003], pp. 146–47, 148–49). Elsewhere, Damasio concludes: "Outsourcing expertise to the nonconscious space is what we do when we hone a skill so finely that we are no longer aware of the technical steps needed to be skillful. We develop skills in the clear light of consciousness, but then we let them go underground, into the roomy basement of our minds, where they do not clutter the exiguous square footage of conscious reflection space" (Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* [New York, 2010], p. 275). See also Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York, 1994), and *Does Consciousness Cause Behavior?* ed. Susan Pockett, William P. Banks, and Shaun Gallagher (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

Thus, it makes no sense to regard mind and body as separate components when it comes to assessing skilled action (as inert organs they may still be regarded as separate components; but that is a different context, focusing on anatomy rather than neurology); skilled action binds them together with too much “intimacy” (Haugeland’s term, meaning “*commingling* or *integralness*”) to allow such differentiation (“MEE,” p. 208).

Courbet, a skilled artist with an enormous accretion of habituated procedures, takes up the task of painting a picture and moves his body to do so. Surely he begins the project with a general mental schema for the picture, inventing a composition or, more likely in the case of *The Waterspout*, *Etretat*, choosing one perception of the world among many as worthy of copy. But that is not how he executes. He does not, before he acts, concoct a mental representation of how he will position his thumb in relation to his fingers, or how he will pivot his wrist or bend his elbow, or how he will swing his left hand, holding the palette, towards his right, holding the brush. Of course, he does ponder his next steps (neurons firing away in the brain), but those deliberations probably take the form of thoughts such as “that area of water is getting too dark,” or “I like that texture enough to let it expand leftwards,” and then the automatic protocols for LIGHTENING or ROUGHENING activate and hands execute, even as mind may move onto its next consideration.

As with hands, so with the tools of palette and brush. Mid-concerto Joshua Bell has no idea where his bow may be; Tiger Woods pays no heed to the location of his club mid-swing (were they to stop and think about it, they would surely falter). And, as he paints, Courbet might well be unable to report which particular brush he has in hand or even, when he is deeply embroiled in the process, if he is using brush or knife. Michael Polanyi, quoted by Dreyfus, argues: “While we rely on a tool or a probe, these are not handled as external objects. . . . They remain necessarily on our side, . . . forming part of ourselves, the operating persons. We pour ourselves out into them and assimilate them as parts of our existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them.”¹⁰ In just this manner, Courbet resides in the tools of his trade and gives them no more conscious thought when painting than he would attend to his fingers when scratching his head.

As with palette and brush, so with painted surface. Each new patch of pigment takes up its place in relation to previous daubs, Courbet’s artistic process constantly gaining momentum and embarking in new directions

10. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958; New York, 1964), p. 59; quoted, in slightly altered form, in WC, p. 164.

from the feedback loops that spontaneously form among them.¹¹ It is not just that the surface provides a wall of resistance against which gesturing hand and brush (or hand/brush, as a unit) affirm their trajectory and heft—like a swimmer whose precise movements would collapse into ineffectual flailing were it not for the weight of surrounding water against which each stroke presses. It is also that the accumulation of previous brushstrokes define the local situation into which the new smear must enter. Let us imagine Courbet at work: The eye focuses down on an incomplete patch, the brush or knife sweeps across the palette to pick up some mixture of pigments, the tip or blade darts to the surface where it deposits what the ongoing process dictates will fit in best with the set of strokes immediately at hand. The earlier brushstrokes stand as a record for ready reference of decisions reached in previous cycles of the ongoing operation. The latest application acts on the earlier ones by revising them or even covering them up, but the earlier ones also act upon the latest by prompting from it an immediate response to the proximate environment (thus *LIGHTENING* and *ROUGHENING* and such are always dynamic, rather than prescribed, operations). We might thus regard physical paint accumulating on the canvas as creativity congealed, a materially manifested memory of the process of painting extending over time. “My memories are inscribed in the things around me,” Dreyfus maintains (*WC*, p. 178). As well as in the literal sense, slowly drying paint is sticky in this mnemonic manner.

Brain to body; body to hand; hand to brush; brush to canvas: it’s “high bandwidth” all the way down, a single, unified mental/material continuum not cleanly subdivided into differentiated components. This unity, lacking the interposition of bottleneck interfaces across which transduction might take place, greatly complicates the representational status of the brushstroke. Representation, after all, is itself in most cases a form of transduction (above all with the recording of ideas in symbolic words): a coding of pertinent information from original to transcription. The patches of paint on *The Waterspout*, *Etretat*, then, can’t really represent Courbet’s artistic process because they *are* Courbet’s artistic process. It is not as if that process exists over there somewhere (in the man’s brain, for instance), which this paint on canvas then reiterates over here in some derivative form. At best, this instance of representation depends on the trope of synecdoche, part for whole, rather than metonymy, effect for cause. But even synecdoche is a suspect label because this part—the brushstroke, both accretion of

11. Daniel M. Herbert investigates similar cycles between thought and drawing in Daniel M. Herbert, *Architectural Study Drawings* (New York, 1993).

decisions and durable final product—is so completely integrated to the whole of the artistic process that it hardly can qualify as independent representation. Would we say that a book without its cover represents that book or *is* that book itself? Of course we could maintain, as countless critics and art historians have done over the decades, that the brushstrokes evoke more than just artistic process to represent a greater something, Courbet the man: the words he uttered, the lovers and friendships he pursued, the Vendôme Column he pulled down; ultimately (the argument implies), his transcendent soul. Yet that formulation completely begs the question because it presupposes some necessary connection between man and process that must be taken utterly on faith once the two have been differentiated the one from the other. The proper noun *Courbet*, referring to both living creature and artistic process, offers up only a false unity. Is there any ground for believing that the biographical man is “vigorous,” much less “stocky,” just because his brushstrokes happen to be? Imagine if the man Courbet happened to be frail in body and lazy in comportment; it’s still possible that he could have applied paint to canvas with the same thickness and élan. The only aspects of Courbet about which the brushstrokes can speak, namely, how he paints, are precisely those from which they cannot be distinguished.

Fine and good: Courbet’s brushstrokes *are* his artistic process, not a representation of it. But surely representation functions well in other aspects of the picture; *The Waterspout, Etretat*, after all, represents a section of the Normandy coast because it resembles (metaphor rather than metonymy, icon rather than index) that particular collection of water and rocks. Such a claim is undeniable about the general composition; some sort of transduction between actual shoreline and painted seascape has certainly taken place—although the breadth of the bandwidth of such visual, as opposed to linguistic or symbolic, representation is debatable, an issue we will not be pursuing. We are here considering Courbet’s brushstrokes, not his composition. How do they represent the seascape at Etretat or fail to do so?

We have already seen how the palette-knife scrapings in the lower left and center of *The Waterspout, Etretat* do not much resemble water. Technique manages a better match further right, where the canvas depicts Etretat’s rocky bluffs. The correspondence, however, would seem to be more tactile than visual—not surprising at a time when precise visual replication inevitably raised the prospect of Gérôme’s manner of overly studied duplicity (nature transducted through the Académie, as it were). To the right, pigments of ochre and bitumen body forth with much the same texture as Etretat’s cliffs of calcium carbonate. The critics noticed.

"He felt himself drawn by his very flesh . . . toward the material world that surrounded him," marveled Zola in 1866. "He wanted to paint in a way that was meaty and earthy. . . . If I shut my eyes, I see again those energetic canvases, of a single mass, constructed of lime and sand, so real as to be truth itself."¹² Lime and sand! Courbet works the same sort of terrestrial materials across the surface of his canvas that he chose to depict. A caricature by André Gill in 1868 literalizes the metaphor by replacing Courbet's palette knife with a full-size mason's trowel (fig. 2). So, too, did Lemonnier's characterization of the artist; evoking Courbet's *Stone Breakers* of 1849, made famous at the salon of 1850–51, he wrote: "Courbet was the stone breaker of his art, like those he painted" (GC, pp. 25–26). Painting a picture in the manner of Courbet is akin to working the rocks and mortars of this hard world.

Water presents greater challenges, a bit further of a stretch. There can be no question of trickery, of passing off pasty pigments as liquids able to slosh and splash. How, then, to make a tactile match while remaining honest to both medium and subject matter? Courbet could not change the actual substance of either painting or world, but he could search out whatever physical attributes they might share, despite their differences. Consider again the lower left of *The Waterspout, Etretat*. Paint may not atomize like seawater and water may not corrugate like the edges of these patches of paint, but they both fragment, and Courbet gives us that. Paint may not flow nor water congeal, but they both have their density, and Courbet gives us that. *The Waterspout, Etretat* and many of the artist's other late landscapes preserve a certain integrity of material (their own and the world's) by featuring those aspects of the world that resemble his paints.

Lemonnier, though his rhetorical figures here are prone to gallop away from him, seems to have perceived the general tendency. "Water fills the middle of these landscapes with sheets of silver, bubbling with foam. Courbet gives them density rather than transparency. . . . At times . . . these splendid seascapes resemble incrustations of marble and metal, the waves rear up like horses, and the foam, which flattens at its points, crumbles apart like shards of marble being shaped by the blows of a mallet" (GC, pp. 51, 58). Despite the fact that the critic relies on extraneous equine entities to establish the similarity, he does firm up the fluid to find its common ground with the dried oil paints before his eyes. Courbet's choice of tools, Lemonnier argued, reinforced the tendency. "The palette knife . . . freezes

12. The words "flesh" and "meaty" disclose the second trajectory of Zola's argument, which (because we are not considering the nudes) need not concern us here: Courbet also embraces the materiality of "plump women" ("C," pp. 311–12).



FIGURE 2. André Gill, "G. Courbet," *Le Petit Figaro*, 14 June 1868. Reproduced in *Courbet selon les caricatures et les images*, ed. Charles Léger (Paris, 1920), p. 78.

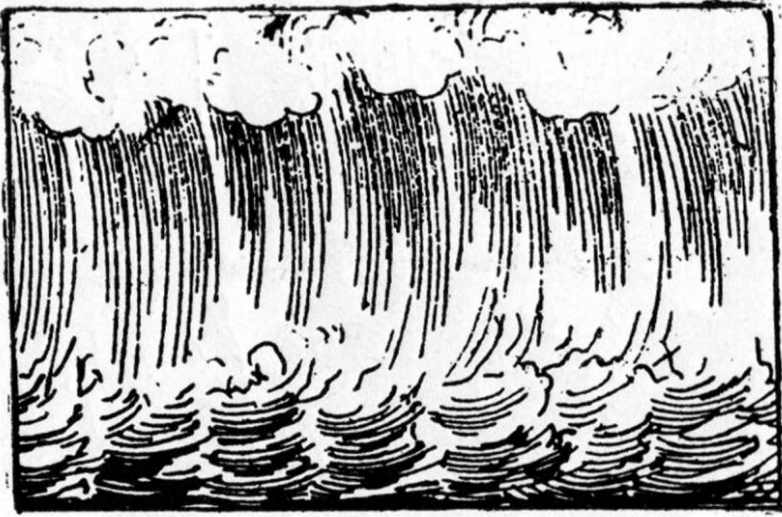
the moisture out of the paint, and replaces the porosity of life with the hardness of marble and metal. It . . . materialize[s] all that it touches" (GC, p. 62). So, the artist doesn't try to fool us into believing that his paints possess properties that they do not in order get them to correspond to the characteristics of nature. Rather, he features in nature only those characteristics that correspond to the real properties of his paints.

Nothing confirms this predilection for matching world to canvas more than Courbet's idiosyncratic selection of subject matter. A calm sea lies flat, and (unlike many other artists) Courbet rarely depicts it. Only during a tempest, the painter's preferred weather, does water rise up to form a

vertical face. Lemonnier was wrong: Courbet's waves don't rear up like horses, they rise up like the painted surface of a canvas hanging on the wall. Even more so do his cloud-filled skies. What, after all, is a waterspout, this thing that Courbet chose to feature? A remarkable condition in which water, against its nature, stands vertical. In almost all cases, however, a spout remains a single funnel of swirling vapor, a mere line, not a plane. Only on extraordinary occasions—we have no way to know whether Courbet actually happened to witness such an event along the Normandy coast—do a row of waterspouts form, but even then they never conjoin into a single entity. So where is the titular waterspout in Courbet's painting from Etretat? We might be tempted to locate it in the column of lighter sky to the right of center, but a spout would appear dark against light, not the reverse; this streak of paint reads better as a shaft of sunlight breaking through the clouds. More likely candidates are the dark streaks further left that all but join together to form a curtain. Gustave Randon had already captured the gist in 1867 in his illustration "A Waterspout; *Audaces tromba juvat*" (substituting *tromba*, close to the French *trombe* meaning "waterspout," for *fortuna* in Virgil's phrase "Fortune favors the bold"), a caricature of the relatively more meteorologically accurate painting *The Waterspout* of 1866, shown at the salon of 1867 (figs. 3–4). Where the earlier painting still allowed the discernment of discrete funnels, the canvas from 1870 treats the background sky, like the waves in the fore- and middle ground, as a solid wall of dark water.

To give preference to things that match the properties of painting, to render those aspects of them that correspond to qualities of the medium: such an approach would seem to risk the homogenization of the world into the stuff of art. But that does not happen, owing to the great variety of color, texture, and sheen achievable in oils—even in spite of Lemonnier's qualms that Courbet's palette knife "substitutes uniformity for variety" in comparison to the brush (*GC*, p. 62). Such is the virtue of oil painting, and Courbet exploits the full range of its possible effects to bestow his canvases with marked heterogeneity. In *The Waterspout*, *Etretat*, for instance, the scintillating asperity of the white foreground foam contrasts with the course earthiness of the middle-ground rocks, while both stand out against the field of smooth, matte streaks that make up the background rain and spouts. Edmond About, reviewing the salon of 1866, proclaimed: "No one excels more than [Courbet] in rendering the diverse surfaces of things. His painting, as supple as it is solid, accommodates to even the most complicated demands of execution."¹³ Added Jules-Antoine Castagnary, critic

13. Edmond About, *Salon de 1866* (Paris, 1867), p. 45.



45401

UNE TROMBE.

Audaces tromba juvat

FIGURE 3. Gustave Randon, "A Waterspout; Waterspout Favors the Bold," *Le Journal Amusant*, 1867. Reproduced in *Courbet selon les caricatures et les images*, ed. Charles Léger (Paris, 1920), p. 72.

and friend of the artist, writing in 1863: "His way of working, which is wonderfully rich, accommodates itself to differentiate each object that it treats."¹⁴ If anything, Courbet's multifarious technique tends toward a disarticulation of the image, one part from another. Nature, like painting, consists of a great collection of disparate elements that may draw together, but may also drift apart. No aesthetic or atmospheric envelope supersedes to unify the material qualities of either picture or physical world.

Courbet not only has substituted one form of iconic resemblance for another, tactile for visual. He also has, in a sense, reversed the usual direction of representational similitude. More than having the picture strive to look like the world, Courbet selects for inclusion in his canvas only those aspects of the world that physically resemble his paints. Yet with that re-

14. Jules-Antoine Castagnary, *Salons, 1857-70* (Paris, 1892), p. 149.



FIGURE 4. Gustave Courbet, *The Waterspout* (1866). Oil on canvas, 43 × 66 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

versal, the process of representation itself tends to dissipate because it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to distinguish paints from earth and even from water. If representation consists of a present signifier standing in for an absent signified, then *The Waterspout*, *Etretat*, paradoxically, lacks the absence of real material to be worked; it's already there. "Lime and sand": Courbet does not record rock and stone; he piles up and pushes about just those substances across the surface of his canvas. He paints his picture as he lives his life, dealing with stuff.

Once again, Haugeland and Dreyfus come to our aid. "*Perception is cheap*," writes Haugeland, "*representation expensive*" ("MEE," p. 219). For routinized activities it is simply more efficient to come to grips directly with the world—both perceive it and act upon it, to expand Haugeland's maxim—than it is to transduct it from world to mental representation and then transduct it back again into deeds. Haugeland recalls the slogan of artificial intelligence expert Rodney Brooks, "*the world is its own best model*" (quoted in "MEE," p. 219);¹⁵ and continues by quoting (and extensively analyzing) a key passage from Dreyfus: "When we are at home in the world, the meaningful objects embedded in their context of references among which we live are not a model of the world stored in our mind or

15. See Rodney A. Brooks, "Elephants Don't Play Chess," *Robotics and Autonomous Systems* 6 (1990): 5.

brain; *they are the world itself*" (quoted in "MEE," p. 231; see WC, pp. 177–78). In essence, the high-bandwidth chain linking mind to body to canvas extends onwards from there into the world, and it would be as meaningless to distinguish canvas from cliff as discrete components within Courbet's representational system as it would be to distinguish his mind from his hand. (This, I take it, rather than visual resemblance, is the principal characteristic defining his realism.) The picture does not represent how the painter copes with the world, it *is* how he copes with the world. The artistic process embodied in his corpulent brushstrokes that goes by the name Courbet, far from distancing itself from the material world and making either a mental model of it in the brain or a painted likeness of it on canvas, resides deeply imbedded within that world itself.

Up to now, it may seem that in presenting this description of Courbet (the name for an artistic process) as the deep integration of mind and body and world I am discounting the possibility of differentiation, of the presence of incommensurate elements within a particular collection of paintings. That is not the case. Instances of disruptive irregularity do appear in these works, but mapped onto a different axis, as it were: not along the high-bandwidth spectrum stretching horizontally from synapse to ocean spray, but rather arising vertically to manifest themselves at higher levels, incommensurate with the lower-level network. Here entities, including even subjects, emerge that, while remaining at least partially causally connected, cannot be reduced to or explained by the network of intimate interactions extending outward from the brushstroke.

At first glance, Courbet's late inland landscapes would appear to provide prime evidence of a general, even deadening uniformity. These canvases, executed mostly in the mountainous region of his native Franche-Comté, often feature (like the waterspout pictures) vertical elements—cliffs, thick forests, and the like—that block the deep view and echo the upright orientation of the picture.¹⁶ Courbet's frequent practice of showing a winter scene adds

16. Both T. J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner have dismissed Courbet's landscape paintings owing to this lack of spatial recession and to what they each perceive as a resulting over-emphasis on homogenizing technique. Clark writes:

Courbet's landscapes very quickly become imprisoned within a formula. They are, typically, close-up views of a dense, continuous surface of rock and trees; for the most part a surface which rises vertically, parallel to the picture plane. Recession into a far distance is relatively rare, and where it appears it is perfunctorily handled. The sky is all but absent, pushed above a high horizon line. . . . What is lacking . . . is Courbet's urge to represent, in his 'earnest, empirical' fashion, the particular surface and gravity of the things before him, their individual nature as well as the matter they share. In the landscapes—and this in direct and limiting contrast to the greatest figure paintings—individual shapes and surfaces and weights tend to recede into the thick paste of paint. The palette knife takes over, the things

the additional device of depicting snow, which bedecks the scenery much as paint covers a canvas.¹⁷ In *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* from around 1866, the palette knife applies patches of white paint uniform in size, tone, and texture to fore-, middle, and background alike, pulling the depths toward the pictorial surface (fig. 5). Only strokes that depict the deer, the dark recesses of a grotto to the left, and the tree branches above, which occlude most of the deep view, offer alternate types of touch, many of them brushed. This sort of winter forest scene would seem to offer the potential for greater surface consistency and thematic regularity than the ocean views of differentiated water, rock, and skies. Over the years, such uniformity in Courbet's late landscapes has opened itself to a variety of interpretations. Some critics at the time, as well as a number of art historians since, have faulted the works for what they take as a failure of nerve on Courbet's part, especially in comparison to the politically engaged genre scenes of the late 1840s, full of stylistic tension. Zola rued in 1866, "Courbet, this year, has rounded the rough corners of his genius and paints with a velvet touch. . . . This powerful spirit [is] admired [by the unthinking crowd] just at the moment when he has lost something of his power" ("C," p. 310). Others have posited a facile metaphor between surface regularity and political structure to suggest that Courbet's landscapes express the spirit of democracy and

themselves are lost. Foliage and cliff-face blur into a froth of pigment, indefinite without being in any effective sense ambiguous, since the paint is never precise enough to invite any one reading, or even suggest finite alternatives.

(T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic* [London, 1973], pp. 132–33)

Wagner argues in a similar vein: "In most of these scenes, . . . penetration into the forest interior is almost defeated by a dense screen of branches, rocks and foliage. Each part is treated equally, drawn with the same generalizations, constructed with the same layered washes of pigment." Accordingly, specific subject matter ceases to matter: "The artist . . . placed his easel at will, anywhere, and found truth without selecting it. . . . For critics, that direct, impartial approach to a rather vague entity, nature, replaces and outweighs the importance and meaning for his art of individual sites as real places" (Anne M. Wagner, "Courbet's Landscapes and Their Market," *Art History* 4 [Dec. 1981]: 424, 423). I believe that this argument both overlooks pronounced variation in Courbet's painterly execution (and critical recognition of that variety) and misinterprets the gist of Courbet's representational gambit. To focus on nonrecessional scenes is not to fail to select; it is rather to select scenes with a vertical character. To paint a landscape with a loose manner that seemingly "reduce[s]" the prospect to *effet* (which Wagner considers a means of making anodyne canvases palatable to a bourgeois audience averse to content and conflict) is not to lose one's grasp of the physical world but rather to search after precisely those aspects of it that the painting can bring to the surface without relying on deception.

17. Klaus Herding has commented on "the leveling effect of the blanket of snow" (Klaus Herding, *Courbet: To Venture Independence*, trans. John William Gabriel [New Haven, Conn., 1991], p. 81; hereafter abbreviated C).



FIGURE 5. Gustave Courbet, *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* (c. 1866). Oil on canvas, 54 × 72 cm. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

equality—as if artistic form and political form necessarily march in lock-step to the same ideological drummer.¹⁸ Whether thus condemned or championed, both approaches assume greater stylistic homogeneity during the second part of Courbet's career.

Yet finding only uniformity here may be reading not only the seascapes but even the winter landscapes against the grain. Within *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter*, three deer materialize: shadows extending from the grotto nearly swallow two of the group, but their plucky companion ventures forth down a path between hillocks. It is certainly possible to see these

18. For instance, Linda Nochlin has written:

A reflection of the social ideals of 1848 could be seen in the very pictorial structure of such a work as the *Burial at Ornans*. By its seemingly casual and fortuitous arrangement—without beginning, middle or end—by its lack of selectivity and hence its implied rejection of any accepted hierarchy of values, by its uniform richness of detail which tends to give an equal emphasis to every element and thus produces, as it were, a pictorial democracy, a compositional *égalité*, by its simplicity, awkwardness and lack of all Establishment rhetoric, it could be seen as a paradigm for the *quarante-huitard* ideal itself. As exemplified in such works, both Realism and Democracy were expressions of the same naïve and stalwart confrontation of—and challenge to—the status quo. [Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 48]

Herding has a more nuanced version of this argument, which I will discuss below.

creatures as fully integrated parts of a harmonious natural whole. Lemonnier, for one, could write: “The accord between animal and landscape is proof of Courbet’s good sense. . . . He rarely paints one without the other, thus associating them as part of the same life; and, in fact, the animal is nothing other than the incarnation of the energies of the earth” (GC, pp. 55–56). Haugeland might say that it makes no sense to distinguish deer from surrounding ecosystem as separate components because the connections between them are too high-bandwidth; he borrows cognitive scientist Herbert Simon’s example of an ant picking its way across the irregularity of beach sand to illustrate such intimacy.¹⁹ This attitude toward nature probably still rings true to many of today’s viewers of Courbet’s landscapes, who might also be the sort to seek a rejuvenating walk through the woods and could well regard the fauna they encounter as entirely assimilated into the fabric of untouched nature. Certainly the two calm deer to the left seem to meld into the wintry forest in this way; their dark tonalities blend into the shadows, while the curled-up one could be mistaken for a boulder.

However, the more daring beast at the center of the picture—starkly juxtaposed against the white of the snow, back legs taut for flight, their shape echoing in inverse the V of the hillocks—is another matter entirely. So, too, is Courbet himself, who was no mere hiker, as his friend Castagnary attested: “A hunter as much as a painter, he more than once interrupted a landscape study he had begun to seize a rifle and shoot at some game passing by.”²⁰ A hunter sets his sights on singularity, not on continuity; on differentiation, not integration. Confronted with the scene given by *The Roe Deer’s Shelter in Winter*, his vision tunnels in on that healthy buck (I will presuppose the sex, given the obvious implication of a family group); all else would fade from view. Panoramic vision cedes to narrow attentiveness. At this point, the stroll through the woods becomes a contest of wills. “I have a quarry with which I can match my wits,” declares the master hunter General Zaroff in Richard Connell’s *The Most Dangerous Game* of 1924.²¹ While Courbet does not stoop to Zaroff’s evil extreme, we still can sense in *The Roe Deer’s Shelter in Winter* the testing of competing resolves, at the highest of stakes (at least for the deer) and with an uncertain outcome. Will Courbet (the hunter now, not the painter) kill, or will the

19. See Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (1969; Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 63–64; quoted in “MEE,” p. 209.

20. Castagnary, *Exposition des œuvres de Gustave Courbet à l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts (Mai 1882)* (Paris, 1882), p. 18.

21. Richard Connell, *The Most Dangerous Game* (1924; Rockville, Md., 2008), p. 23; hereafter abbreviated MDG.

buck escape? Those haunches, like tight springs, express the challenge: "See if your trigger can outpace my leap!" Predator and pray face off, the one against the other.

Face off? But that deer is retreating, its eyes out of sight. Not quite, for while its head may turn away, its white rump and dark anus beneath an upraised tail mimic a bigger, more intimidating oculus—like the owl's eye on a moth's wing, or an oyster on the half shell, or the glint off a sardine can.²² Much as a stroke of the brush stands out among the palette knife's patches, Courbet's cervine target becomes a wrenching anomaly, a rent in the otherwise constant screen of the landscape. What is more, the rent reveals that beyond the screen lies something real that must remain invisible on this surface; perhaps it is even a consciousness (at least that is the effect of the oculus). The picture may generally lack spatial depth, but in this manner it achieves ontological depth, psychological depth. Not quite salience, then, but its spatial opposite: reentrance. The hunter encounters something more than the hiker's uniformly pleasant view (Courbet paints more than an impression); his sight attempts to pierce into the scene, just as his bullet will plunge into flesh.

Klaus Herding, who has produced the most intriguing account of Courbet's landscapes, comes closest to capturing the dual nature of these scenes. Generally, Herding (in a manner easy to render congruent with Hauge-land's account of mind, body, and world) finds the late landscapes drift toward "egalitarian structure" and "a search for unifying characteristics, links, analogies" that make them "a representation of the equalizing effect of nature and its suppression of individual objects" (C, pp. 89, 93).²³ Not only individual objects, including animals, blend into the natural setting; the viewing subject also disperses in front of the scene. "Any fixation on a single viewpoint (literally and figuratively) [Courbet] considered bourgeois, a contradiction of the equality principle" (C, p. 78). Nonetheless—and this is where Herding's account achieves a complexity lacking in other accounts that equate political and pictorial structure—"Wholesale and abstract leveling, as Maxime Du Camp remarked, . . . might well create . . . 'a fierce need for authority' . . . in politics and art, and above all make people long for the great man, the absolute ruler, the divine artist" (C, p. 63). Courbet's surfaces, variegated both stylistically and thematically, manifest a tension between uniformity and singularity, which could even

22. Like having to explain a joke, providing the citation here would ruin the reference.

23. As my description above of the variety of painting techniques used in *The Waterspout*, *Etretat* might indicate, I would not share with Herding this blanket characterization of the late works.

take the form of a contrast between “a relatively near, isolated object” and “a comprehensive overview” (C, p. 81).

For Herding, Courbet in many of his late landscapes “had replaced [the] ‘great man’ with the authority of ‘the great outdoors’” itself before dissolving even that singularity beneath the wash of homogenized technique, “scientific observation[,] and an intuitional feel for natural phenomena” (C, pp. 93, 89). However, given the incessant interspersions of game animals and natural setting in these pictures, a different interpretation might seem to press itself on us. Does not the hunter repeatedly step onto these stages as a new authoritative protagonist, capable in his willful confrontation with his prey to reestablish both the singularity of his target and the spatial specificity of his point of view? Does not the hunter thus distinguish himself as a separate component, looking upon and utilizing the natural system rather than finding himself fully integrated into it?

Well, almost, except for one additional consideration. Hunters (and other humans) may aspire for such omnipotence over those subject to their will, but in their limited corporeal form they never actually attain such transcendent powers.²⁴ And even were they to do so (that is the sort of impossibility that fiction can explore), they might well be disappointed. As General Zaroff, that modern-day Nimrod, lamented about his situation before he devised his story-worthy, homicidal solution: “Hunting was beginning to bore me! . . . [It] had ceased to be what you call ‘a sporting proposition.’ It had become too easy. I always got my quarry. Always. There is no greater bore than perfection. . . . No animal had a chance with me anymore. That is no boast; it is a mathematical certainty” (MDG, pp. 21–22). Without uncertainty, without the risk of failure, perhaps even without the possibility of personal danger, hunting loses all interest. Who still bothers to play tic-tac-toe? Once one masters the game, one ceases to engage it and instead becomes a dispassionate analyst of its full disposition, as if from above. Zaroff actually enacts this metaphysical leap from inside participant to outside observer: “I was lying in my tent with a splitting headache one night when a terrible thought pushed its way into my mind. Hunting was beginning to bore me!” (MDG, p. 21).

So, Herding’s image of the “great man”—at least to the degree that it carries with it the connotation of omniscience implicit in the phrase “divine artist”—will not do as the alternative to a general leveling of the landscape. We need, instead, some description that allows for irregularity

24. The tension between infinite divine omniscience and finite human vision, both debilitating and enabling, is a theme repeatedly explored in my book, James D. Herbert, *Our Distance from God: Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music* (Berkeley, 2008).

and the concentration of interest, but also resists the ascription of absolute control. We might productively borrow the idea of emergence from the science of complexity, an interdisciplinary line of thought that has developed over the past quarter century in academic domains ranging from physics and computer science to biology and economics.²⁵ (I will, in a moment, relate this strain of thought to the arguments of Haugeland and Dreyfus.) Emergence concerns the way in which the interactions of simple behaviors at one level of a complex interactive system can prompt unpredictable events at a higher level of the system that are qualitatively different from, and irreducible to, anything that exists at the lower level. Imagine a few relatively isotropic fields of chaotic material: the primordial soup, say, or (at a grittier texture of chaos) a sylvan glade, or (still grittier) a developed market economy. Within such fields, certain nodes with a higher degree of organization spontaneously emerge through the random interaction of many small elements (we don't even need the fiction of conscious actors realizing their intents): primitive life in the primordial soup; deer and hunter in the landscape; a company with a new invention or new econometric model in the market. These nodes have the characteristic of striving after self-replication within their particular field. They can succeed, achieving growth; or they can fail, leading to extinction. Each node is constantly reacting to its environment—both the background chaos and other striving nodes—to adjust its tactics of self-replication. Biologists, for instance, speak of an evolutionary arms race when predator and prey each repeatedly adapt more sophisticated means of attack or defense in response to changes in their adversary; economists describe a similar dynamic of improvement through competition. Social scientists might call on game theory to account for such interactions, and (at the risk of a misleading but unavoidable pun) we might well characterize the interaction between hunter and deer as a game, with each actor using its wits to anticipate and preempt the moves of the other. While behavior may become more organized—the hunter becomes wiler or invents a more powerful rifle; the deer evolves camouflage or learns to run away from men bearing guns—no entity creates, plans, or fully comprehends the overall

25. I have drawn from a number of authors to develop a nontechnical understanding of emergence: John H. Holland, *Emergence: From Chaos to Order* (Reading, Mass., 1998); Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (New York, 2001); Stuart A. Kauffman, *The Origins of Order* (New York, 1993); Roger Lewin, *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos* (New York, 1992); *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons*, ed. Nancy Murphy and William R. Stroeger (Oxford, 2007); and M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York, 1992).

disposition or knows its outcome. No one rises above the game to a position of omniscience or omnipotence.

A few implications. First, a foray (an extended set of moves in the game) cannot be fully planned out in advance. If a hunter just followed a preset line on his map, failing to track the beast and alter his route according to changes in circumstance, only the most improbable of chances would ever get him near enough to his prey to let him get off a shot. This dynamic should sound familiar; it resembles the behavior of the expert in Dreyfus's and Haugeland's accounts. As the Dreyfus brothers quote phenomenologist Aron Gurwitsch: "What is imposed on us to do . . . is not determined by us as someone standing outside the situation simply looking on at it; what occurs and is imposed are rather prescribed by the situation and its own structure itself; and we do more and greater justice to it the more we let ourselves be guided by it, i.e., the less reserved we are in immersing ourselves in it and subordinating ourselves to it."²⁶ (I would quibble with Gurwitsch only by pointing out that the "situation" can no more "prescribe" than can the agent.)

Second, the events of a particular hunt are in no sense predetermined; rather, they emerge from the interaction of its constituent parts in unpredictable ways. This is not an epistemic limitation; it is an ontological fact. Even a massive (or divine) mind aware of the position and trajectory of every molecule making up hunter, deer, and forest at the initial moment of the hunt could not anticipate the emergent patterns of higher organization that spontaneously self-generate to influence the outcome of the contest: a human or cervine tactic, say; a gust of wind; or the formation of obscuring fog. Part of the attraction of the hunt, in fact, is that ultimately it does manage to pull a starkly definite outcome out of a wildly indefinite context.

Third, actors, namely the hunter and the deer, have reappeared on the stage—though we need to be quite precise about what constitutes such agents. On one hand, we already have a description of the workings of the expert that would argue against any differentiation of such planning subjects over and against the contexts of body and environment in which they operate. Thus we know better than to regard the thoughts of hunter and deer as somehow belonging to autonomous beings implementing their intents but, instead, can consider this sort of human or cervine conscious mental activity as themselves emergent resources that serve the purpose of refining the tactics of pursuit and evasion within the actual situation of the

26. Aron Gurwitsch, *Human Encounters in the Social World* (Pittsburgh, 1979), p. 67; quoted in Dreyfus and Dreyfus, "The Challenge of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment for Cognitive Science," p. 111.

hunt. On the other hand, the process of emergence does indeed have the capacity to generate entities at a higher level of complexity, including subjects, that are more than the sum of their parts. The best example comes from the insect world: Individual ants each follow a remarkably rudimentary set of programmed instructions—"if you encounter pheromone X, then do Y"—and yet the mutual encounters of thousands of them give rise to colonies whose divisions of labor, methods of daily provisioning, and even architecture can manifest extraordinary complexity, complexity that never could have been discerned from an examination of the simple pheromonal code at the level of individual creature. Analogically, individual neurons behave very simply—"if you are stimulated, fire!"—yet the animated intertwining of billions of them give rise to a complexity and coherency of mind—of hunter and of deer—that remain irreducible to properties of the constituent neurons. Out there in the world, you can't pull out your scalpel and cut mind away from neural network; *mind* and *neural network* are roughly two names for much the same territory, viewed at two different levels of emergence where different, indeed irreconcilable, characteristics become apparent. Thus the subjects *hunter* and *deer* as presented thematically in Courbet's picture need not be taken by us as affirmations of the idea of autonomous agents, for each can better be regarded as complex nodes at a higher level, emerging out of myriad interactions among thought processes, body parts, and various aspects of the surrounding forest, all of which are depicted, implied, or presupposed in this fictive world. (The Courbet who deliberated over this theme was certainly oblivious to the concept of emergence, but he would have understood fully well the contingent nature of the hunt and the interdependence of its participants.)

Thematically, then, the tension in *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* and in Courbet's other late hunting scenes is not between a uniform landscape and Herding's figure of absolute authority. It is between a chaotic field of nature and certain nodes of higher organization emerging out of that field and thus disrupting its relative regularity. It has the dynamic of a game—not just player against player (hunter against deer) but also moves played out against the game board (the activities of stalking and flight within the sylvan setting). These tensions, as recorded in a painting capturing a moment at mid-hunt, never reach resolution. We cannot rise to the omniscient position where the outcome of the chase can be known both because we, as humans viewing the scene from the perspective of the hunter, are always caught within the game and because the game itself is still evolving according to the unpredictable interactions of its elements, actors and setting alike, and thus lacks predetermination.

The dynamic pertains even in unpopulated paintings, such as *The Waterspout, Etretat*. Just as the venturesome deer presents itself in the forest scene as an anomalous node, so too certain parts of the seascape, such as the bright patch of foam at the center, insist on making a splash. In this case, the spray does burst forward as salient, but with a posited real wave, as it were, reentrant behind it. The waves depicted to the left in the painting, which are also featured in many of Courbet's other images of the ocean, are, in fact, prime examples from nature of self-generating systems of higher organization emerging out of the relatively uniform chaos of background turbulence. The central crash of water is then the story (belonging to the genre of tragedy) of such a system's demise as it encounters its enduring adversary, the rock, and returns to general disorder. We, the witnesses on the beach, share with the hunter an incapacity to foresee any exact outcomes: the trajectory of each bit of spray, for instance, or the timing of the next shower tossed up, or when the rock will ultimately cede, as it surely must, to one wave too many. Divine omniscience is no more available in *The Waterspout, Etretat* than it is in *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter*. Both pictures formulate worlds in which dramas, unscripted and unpredictable, emerge to disrupt the regularity of the field.

To be sure, *The Waterspout, Etretat* and *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* present more than just thematic expositions to the eyes of hunter and beachcomber. They, and Courbet's other late landscapes, also offer themselves up as painted surfaces, executed by an artist and viewed by an aesthetically inclined audience. So perhaps the "great man," the "divine artist," has retreated to the redoubt of style where Courbet's loose and varied manner of painting, seemingly the product of his artistic intent, would appear authoritatively to express his individual sensibility in response to a place. Thus the great myth of modern French painting, so well personified in Courbet, that the brushstroke expresses the authentic and autonomous self. The artist's devotion to direct perception of nature and to sincere expression of it, far from constraining stylistic autonomy, could even seem to enhance it greatly because these independent commitments liberated him from the petty professional constraints of the Académie and École. As Lemonnier contended:

[Courbet's] temperament is of a whole piece. [He] receives an impression of objects and expresses them as he senses them, without being distracted by goals foreign to his [own] task as a painter. [GC, p. 16]

He found his path, and he marched down it with the obstinacy of a man who is sure of having his destiny in front of him. [GC, p. 25]

He had the audacity to be himself, with the subaltern sides of his temperament, without attempting to see beyond that. [GC, p. 66]

By this account, Courbet was no player engaged in a game with others. Members of the academy, juries of the salon, could get caught up in such social machinations—which Lemonnier would characterize as a milieu “of lies and bad faith, [of the] shabbiness of little souls” (GC, p. 19).²⁷ Courbet’s idiosyncratic brushstrokes, in contrast, declare him master of himself and master of his art.

Nonetheless, no matter how persistent this hoary myth may prove and however wide the breadth of the subscription to it, it simply cannot stand before scrutiny as an adequate account of painting—Courbet’s or anyone else’s.²⁸ Painting does not cede itself thus to mastery; its complex character precludes any omniscient stance outside of engaged practice. Haugeland and Dreyfus have already set out the reasons why this is so. There is no Courbet, and especially no Courbet the expert painter, posed outside the realm of the brushstrokes on canvas; the creative process connects mind and body and paint and canvas with all too much intimacy to allow for that sort of distance and differentiation. We can now enhance this analysis by recognizing the dynamics of emergence operating across this field of highly interactive elements. In this creative process, as in the primordial soup and in the sylvan setting and with the market, nodes with a higher degree of organization arise. Like *deer* and *Microsoft*, these nodes assume names: *Courbet* and *The Roe Deer’s Shelter in Winter*. Like the collections

27. The passage actually refers to the petty types Delacroix earlier encountered, but there is no doubt that the critic would have believed that little had changed among the bureaucrats of artistic mediocrity during the intervening years.

28. Serving as an example of the longevity of this modernist myth, curator Mary Morton has recently written:

A comprehensive look at his contribution to the genre of landscape . . . reveals a radically innovative practice in Courbet’s choice of motifs and his compositions, use of color, and paint application. His landscapes initiated a vital current of Modernist painting, shifting the focus of ambitious painting away from narrative description—whether historical, mythological, poetic, religious, or political—to self-expression, with nature providing both a subject and a less regulated arena in which the artist could enact an original performance-in-paint. Through Courbet’s work, the experience of viewing painting became less that of reading and interpreting a codified language of represented figural gestures than of witnessing the artist’s expressive manipulation of paint on a two-dimensional surface. Courbet’s landscapes broke from the rhetorical tradition of reference and emulation—the backbone of French painting for two hundred years—to a practice ardently devoted to fresh vision, unmediated perception, and the direct expression of emotion, central tenets of avant-garde painting for the next hundred years.

(Marty Morton, “To Create a Living Art: Rethinking Courbet’s Landscape Painting,” in *Courbet and the Modern Landscape*, ed. Mary Morton and Charlotte Eyerman [exhibition catalog, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 21 Feb.–14 May 2006], p. 2)

of amino acids in the primordial soup, these emergent entities show distinct signs of life; obviously Courbet grows and acts on the world, but the painting also seems to take on a life of its own. The expert movements of the brush and knife quickly establish their own rhythm, their own flow, and soon the placement of paint feels beyond the conscious control of the artist. Novelists sense the same thing when the characters they invent seem to demand that their actions and emotions pursue a certain trajectory; scholars can feel the same way about the arguments they formulate. Jazz improvisers sense that they must follow a musical line as they play rather than deciding on it ahead of time and then leading their instrument through the paces during performance. Courbet did not declare “let the waters under the sky be gathered together” and “let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind” and then command his canvases to realize his immutable and exhaustive initial intents (Gen. 1:9, 1:24). He set out upon the project, then constantly adjusted as its demands upon him shifted and evolved. Eventually, *The Roe Deer’s Shelter in Winter* just went where it had to go; it emerged, as did Courbet the creative artist, from the process in ways entirely unpredictable given initial conditions. At a lower level, a multitude of daubs on brush tip and on canvas flit or budge, mix in or cover over, in rapid response to the colors and textures—the artistic equivalent of pheromones—of their mates closest at hand. (Science writer Steven Johnson argues: “*Local* turns out to be the key term in understanding the power of swarm logic. We see emergent behavior in systems like ant colonies when the individual agents in the system pay attention to their immediate neighbors rather than wait for orders from above. They think locally *and* act locally, but their collective action produces global behavior.”)²⁹ Simultaneously at a higher level, painter and painting acted on each other like two bucks butting heads in the wood—or in Courbet’s enormous *Spring Rut, the Battle of the Stags* of 1861. At times, Courbet caused *The Roe Deer’s Shelter in Winter* to proceed in a certain way, but at other times *The Roe Deer’s Shelter in Winter* caused Courbet to paint in a certain manner. Along these lines, Dreyfus has written: “Our actions bring the world into line with what we would want if we thought about it, [but] the experience of acting has a world-to-mind direction of causation. We don’t experience ourselves as causing the action; the situation draws the action out of us.”³⁰

29. Johnson, *Emergence*, p. 74.

30. Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Husserl’s (and Searle’s) Concept of Intentionality,” *Rereading Merleau-Ponty: Essays beyond the Continental-Analytic Divide*, ed. Lawrence Hass and Dorothea Olkowski (Amherst, N.Y., 2000), p. 42. As a favorite example on this point, Dreyfus quotes basketball great Larry Bird: “[A lot of the] things I do on the court

Crucially, none of this serves to distinguish Courbet or the picture, as they act upon each other, as components (in Haugeland's sense of the word) separable from the full artistic process. It is not as if we can, at points of low-bandwidth interface, carve Courbet and *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* off as agent and product (input and output), leaving the essence of the creative operation intact inbetween. Painter and painting *are* that operation. These terms all name basically the same thing, but seen at different levels, higher or lower, of emergence. There is no colony without the ants and no ants without a colony (a monad is the walking dead), yet when we look at ants and colony we see different characteristics, characteristics such as "sniffing the danger pheromone" and "covering half an acre" that remain fundamentally irreducible, indeed incomparable, to each other. If you're viewing at the level of one, you can't see the other, and it makes no sense to imagine a unified formicine entity that simultaneously sniffs danger and occupies territory. Likewise, while we can differentiate painter from individual canvas both at a higher level of emergence (like hunter and deer), it would be meaningless to distinguish Courbet from, and then compare him to or conflate him with, the vast collection of minute brushstrokes (and neurons, and so forth) that make up the lower-level interactive field of artistic creation. *Courbet* the emergent subject and *Courbet* the label we attach to an artistic process are incommensurate entities—even as, in a different sense, they always remain the same thing. In this case, however, unlike with *ants* and *colony*, it proves quite easy to use the same name for these dissimilar manifestations at two different levels. Indeed, that is precisely how the great nineteenth-century myth of the brushstroke does its work. *Courbet* is both an artistic process (the complex, unpredictable interaction of myriad parts) and a man (autonomous, the master of his art). The resulting critical amalgam, Courbet the artist fully embedded in his natal land and class yet a master willful and independent, is as devoid of actual substantive content as is the entomological entity that supposedly both sniffs and spreads. This image of the artist may be lacking in meaning or coherence, yet it also has proven wildly useful as an ideological construct, for it allows the miraculous production of an otherwise impossible sort of powerful agent, autochthonous and autonomous at one and the same moment. Sometimes, ideology consists simply in the successful suspension of a contradiction as a truth.³¹

are just reactions to situations. A lot of times, I've passed the basketball and not realized I've passed it until a moment or so later" (p. 45).

31. I expand on this idea, using the tension between individual and collective inherent in

If the great nineteenth-century myth magically renders subject and process commensurate across the divide of their different levels of emergence, the critical account of Courbet as an exemplar of realism similarly strives to efface any incompatibility between painted surface and nature. We have witnessed the conceit, much aided by Courbet's own thematic choices and technical practices, that abstracts out of nature and treats as its essence only those aspects of it that maintain material identity with the paints themselves: lime and sand, vertical surfaces, and all that. By these lights, *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter*, like *The Waterspout*, *Etretat*, reverses the usual direction of representation, in this case by discovering in the dynamics of the hunt something that resembles the dynamics of art. But surely the vast and complex networks of the natural world generate countless emergent entities that remain fundamentally incommensurate with both the pedestrian processes of painting and with their own natural lower-level material substrate with which Courbet's thick oils might hope to establish a match. Those instances of nature that give rise to the feeling of the sublime are the most obvious example, but any part of nature that exceeds culture will serve. Courbet's works would have none of such stuff, would rather pretend that nature of the sort that might escape its grasp simply did not exist. Even when they are large and ambitious, these canvases eschew the sublime (a telling omission); the world they present is always familiar, always closed in, always close to home. Zola, you may recall, claimed the artist "had the raw desire to clutch real nature in his arms," as if it could all be held in his personal embrace; the critic's lapidary definition had art attempt but a "corner of creation seen through a temperament," a means to keep nature's expanse within human bounds ("C," pp. 312, 307). Of course, everyone at the time and since, including Zola and Courbet himself, has known full well that this contained version of nature is more wish than reality. The pleasure of viewing realist pictures always consists in equal measure of letting oneself be drawn in by the fiction of representational adequacy and of exercising the wisdom to recognize the difference between art and world.³² In contrast, during an era when the great nineteenth-century myth was operating at full force, the idea that the brushstroke could fully represent the artist was probably something that really could be believed—or, at least, it did not immediately call for its

the phrase "It's my flag," in Herbert, "Visual Culture / Visual Studies," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago, 2003), pp. 452–64.

32. Cécile Whiting explores this idea in Cécile Whiting, "Trompe l'œil Painting and the Counterfeit Civil War," *Art Bulletin* 79 (June 1997): 251–68.

opposite, the recognition of the brushstroke's biographical inadequacies. In essence, Courbet's pictures (together with their critical reception) make their claim to realism by attempting to reflect the accepted representational adequacy of the brushstroke's gesture toward the self in the opposite direction, as it were, along a less secure trajectory toward the subject matter of nature. We begin to discern the true dynamics of both theme and painterly style in these landscape pictures only when we, contrary to critical protocols for the establishment of coherence and unity, allow both "Courbet" and "nature" to disperse into incommensurate, multilevel multiplicity.

Earlier, I pointed out that it has been argued, both in the artist's day and in subsequent scholarship, that Courbet's later landscapes constitute a failure of nerve, a retreat from his earlier, often more politically engaged paintings. The argument would seem to presume that Courbet, fortified with the hubris of youth and deeply imbedded in a revolutionary situation with its promise of social change, felt able during the earlier phase of his career to do more than simply go hunting for moments within painting where he could rhyme self, surface, and subject matter. Rather, he seemed capable of formulating an authoritative stance for himself and then of imposing his will on his works. Perhaps, then, these earlier works offer an escape from the dynamic of emergence from below because they constitute a forceful reassertion of artistic sovereignty from above. Perhaps the great nineteenth-century myth can survive into our own day through means of these stronger (better, more important, more political, more willful, whatever) early pictures by Courbet.

In no instance, perhaps, is this presupposition of youthful artistic authority more formidable than with Courbet's masterwork of 1854–55, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Artistic Life* (fig. 6). In size alone, *The Painter's Studio* is clearly an ambitious painting. With an acreage over twenty-five times greater than *The Waterspout*, *Etretat* and *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* combined, it aspires to the scale of history painting where the smaller works would seem to settle for mantelpiece decoration. And as a history painting—or as its institutional antithesis, an antihistory painting—it would appear intent on making an important point. The first part of the subtitle given by the artist, *A Real Allegory*, reinforces the sense that this monumental canvas must have some big meaning lying deep within the allegorical realm, beyond whatever aspects of the real it depicts on its surface; whereas the last part of that subtitle, *My Artistic Life*, provides a seemingly unified entity, one fully congruent with the great nineteenth-century myth, around which that big meaning can cohere. *The Burial at Ornans* of 1849–50 and the other major



FIGURE 6. Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of My Artistic Life* (1854–55). Oil on canvas, 361 × 598 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, N.Y.

works of its era may have been more fiercely embedded in a revolutionary moment, but they lack the insistence of *The Painter's Studio* on such allegorical depth.³³ Artist, painting, and subject matter would seem to come together in allegorized unity somewhere beyond the immediate presence of what the picture overtly shows. The sharp conceptual divide between reality and allegory allows this interpretative trope whereby the multiple converges into one. Courbet himself, both author and object of the allegory, would seem the sole coherent custodian of any such concealed singular meaning, which he appears to have chosen to withhold from his viewers. "You'll have to understand it as best you can," the artist declared to his close friend the novelist and critic Champfleury (Jules François Felix Fleury-Husson), in a letter sent from Ornans in late 1854 that thoroughly describes the individual parts of the painting without declaring its unifying thesis: "The people who want to judge will have their work cut out for them, they will manage as best they can."³⁴

Ever since, commentators on the painting have been doing exactly that. Assuming that a coherent and unitary Courbet began with a specific allegorical meaning in his conscious mind before expressing it on canvas, perspicacious viewers have then attempted to pierce through material traces left by the artist to bring that concealed meaning forward to the light of day. *The Painter's Studio* has become one of the great "problem" paintings in art history (alongside such works as Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* of 1656 and Édouard Manet's *Bar of the Folies-Bergère* of 1882) because it allows scholars to become hermeneutic hunters out to bag the big buck of Courbet's allegorical intent that lies hidden somewhere within the forest of his realist project.³⁵ Laurence des Cars summarizes the resulting herd of competing arguments: "For Hélène Toussaint, it represents a Masonic lodge; for Linda Nochlin, a Fourierist metaphor; for Klaus Herding, a lesson in power directed at Napoleon III; for James Rubin, a work influenced by Proudhon. With its use of allegory, *The Painter's Studio* demands interpretation. . . . [It] exists on many levels, never entirely yielding up its secrets."³⁶ Even as interpretations multiply, the actual intent of Courbet

33. Clark, *Image of the People*, remains the strongest study of Courbet during this revolutionary period.

34. Gustave Courbet, letter to Champfleury, [Nov.–Dec. 1854], *The Letters of Gustave Courbet*, trans. and ed. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu (Chicago, 1992), p. 132; hereafter abbreviated "L."

35. Michael Fried names *The Painter's Studio* as "one of the three supreme representations of representation in all Western art," alongside Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Vermeer's *Artist in His Studio* of around 1666 (Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* [Chicago, 1990], p. 155).

36. Laurence des Cars, "The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up a Seven-Year Phase of My Artistic Life," in *Gustave Courbet*, ed. des Cars et al. (exhibition catalog, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 27 Feb.–18 May 2008), p. 224. The list is not

remains an ever-elusive prey. The question that Herding asks, "On what conceptual level does this visually so heterogeneous triptych-like composition coalesce?" voices the mandate that keeps all scholars seeking (C, p. 51).

Yet, what if there is no such conceptual coalescence? What if there is no authoritative intent lying in the depths beyond the surface, unifying into a coherent whole the many parts of this fragmented picture? What if the game continues not because its prey of coalescing concept or authorial intent is elusive but because it never existed (sasquatch or heffalump, not roe deer)? What if, in short, *The Painter's Studio*, rather than standing as the meaningful alternative to the seemingly meaningless later landscapes, instead shares with them a deep-seated incommensurability and a dynamic of emergence out of multiplicity?

In one of those keen observations that makes him such a delight to read, Michael Fried points out certain parallels, "unmistakable as soon as discerned," between the general configuration of the landscape painting on the easel in front of the self-portrait of Courbet at the center of *The Painter's Studio* and the posture of the nude model directly behind him: her head and neck cocked in the manner of the portrayed trees, drapery flowing like the waters of the river depicted just above the painter's lowered left knee.³⁷ What Fried does not remark upon, owing to his exclusive focus on the central group, is that the painting-within-a-painting also echoes the structure of the overall canvas. Just as the tree's foliage forms a dark mass imposing on the landscape from the upper right, so too a shadowy cloud of drapery, which lacks visible support, hangs over the right side of *The Painter's Studio*. Just as a sky and variegated horizon appear in the landscape on the easel, clouds and sky above a line of silhouetted trees and hills provide a backdrop to the full work. In a couple of letters from late 1854, Courbet stated that he had shown on the back wall of his depicted studio the paintings *The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair* of 1850–55 and *The Bathers* of 1853.³⁸ The

exhaustive, most notably excluding the famous reading by Michael Fried, which has *The Painter's Studio* serve as an allegory of painting itself. Fried's argument appears in its most accessible form in *Courbet's Realism* but is nicely summarized in the short abstract appearing at the top of the earlier published version of the argument: "The central group in Courbet's 'Studio' is emblematic of a desire to reduce to an absolute minimum all sense of distance and difference between painting and beholder, the first beholder being the painter himself" (anonymous, abstract for Fried, "Representing Representation: On the Central Group in Courbet's 'Studio,'" *Art in America* 69 [Sept. 1981]: 127).

37. Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, p. 162.

38. See Courbet, letter to Alfred Bruyas, [Nov.–Dec. 1854], *The Letters of Gustave Courbet*, p. 129, and "L," p. 131.

surviving landscape in the background of *The Painter's Studio* was once the picture of peasants (there is no trace of the bathers), but is no longer; rustic heads and baskets have been rounded off to efface the trace of humans, the area of light sky has been greatly expanded in three directions beyond the dimensions of the original work, and no sign of a frame remains. In fact, this landscape bears no remaining resemblance to the framed picture directly behind central easel and model (not *The Bathers*, which shows no sky), nor to the framed canvas placed face to the wall near the left edge. It no longer appears to be a depicted picture at all, for it is not fictively parallel to the background wall of the depicted studio but rather is flush, even selfsame, with the surface of *The Painter's Studio* itself. The series of translucent bands cutting vertically across the background landscape as well as the set of rectilinear articulations that break it and the studio wall into sections further right would appear to contain this work only within the segments of actual canvas that were conjoined in order to make a surface sufficiently large to render *The Painter's Studio*.³⁹ Perhaps Courbet even once painted out this natural setting, and it is only visible now (like the leftmost basket in *The Peasants of Flagey*; like the woman accompanying Charles Baudelaire at the far right of *The Painter's Studio*) owing to the fact that the covering layer has become semi-transparent over time. Once the landscape thus expands (tentatively, ambiguously) across the background, the medallion hanging on the back wall comes to serve double duty as a celestial orb rising above the natural scene, the woman it portrays becoming like a man in the moon. Overall, it is as if Courbet's cosmopolitan studio stirs itself from sleep to remember, in only half awareness, that it once was really the countryside of Courbet's native Franche-Comté.

An aging Eugène Delacroix, who generally approved of the canvas, remarked upon seeing *The Painter's Studio* in 1855: "The only fault is that the picture he is painting creates an ambiguity: it seems to be a *real sky* in the middle of the picture."⁴⁰ But that might be precisely the idea. This depicted studio appears too lofty for a normal interior space.⁴¹ The horizontal line

39. A summary of the construction of the canvas support of *The Painter's Studio* from seven sections of cloth appears in Lola Faillant-Dumas, "Examination by the Laboratoire de Recherche des Musées de France," in *Gustave Courbet, 1819–1877* (exhibition catalog, Galeries Nationales d'Exposition du Grand Palais, Paris, 1 Oct. 1977–2 Jan. 1978), p. 283.

40. Eugène Delacroix, *Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, ed. Paul Flat and René Piot, 3 vols. (Paris, 1895), 3:64.

41. Although the painting was executed entirely in Ornans, Courbet states in the letter to Champfleury that he is depicting his studio in Paris; see "L," p. 131. Benedict Nicolson describes this space, located at 32 rue Hautefeuille but demolished in 1878, as a converted priory, with the erstwhile chapel serving as Courbet's studio. See Benedict Nicolson, *Courbet: The Studio of the Painter* (London, 1973), pp. 22–23. The painting itself provides little architectural detail to aid in the identification.

that appears seven-tenths of the way up the canvas, visibly a seam mark between conjoined sections of canvas that is inadequately painted over, might appear properly placed to function as the demarcation of the top of the back wall, but it absolutely fails to fold that wall forward to define a ceiling. (Similarly, it is unclear along which of three possible vertical lines the side wall to the right bends into the back wall.) Nearly one third of the picture lies above this long horizontal line, but the expanse is virtually ignored in the literature on the painting. What is this upper section for, except to suggest that the painter's studio opens upward like the great outdoors? The depicted sky in the painting is like the sky on the background wall, which is like the real sky. Even within this interior, we join Courbet the hunter on his stalk through the woods.

And what herd of creatures ventures out into clearing within this pseudo-sylvan setting? Let us pull out our field manuals (Courbet's letters, the accumulated discoveries of scholarship) and identify the species and their members. To the left, according to his letter to Champfleury, Courbet assembled a collection of types personifying "society at its highest, its lowest, and its average": figures include "a Jew whom I saw in England," "a priest," "an old Republican of '93," "a hunter," "a fancy-clothes merchant," and "an Irish woman nursing a child" ("L," pp. 131–32). In 1977, Hélène Toussaint complicated the matter by noticing an extraordinary set of resemblances: many of the types to the left bear the recognizable physiognomies of prominent political figures. The Jew looks like financier and statesman Achilles Fould; the Republican of '93 has the face of Minister of the Interior Lazare Carnot; and, most tellingly, the man with a cap accompanied by dogs (unmentioned in the letter to Champfleury) resembles Emperor Napoleon III.⁴² Toussaint's unveiling of the dissimulated portraits has struck most experts as instantly compelling, but we need to consider why. It isn't because the curator laid her hands on the magic key that deciphers the true hidden meaning of Courbet's huge canvas. As it proceeds, Toussaint's list of personalities takes on a Borgesian flavor—the likes of "China" and "Russian socialism, represented by Herzen" join the cast—and the curator's own proposal for a master explanatory device, Freemasonry (that venerable hidden conspiracy, always on call as hidden cause), does not even attempt to account for the various members of this motley crew.⁴³ Rather, the curator's identifications satisfy because their form, not their specific content, activates a hermeneutic plunge into depth.

42. See Hélène Toussaint, "The Dossier on 'The Studio' by Courbet," in *Gustave Courbet, 1819–1877*, pp. 260–66.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

Like the oculus of the deer's hindquarters, each face promises a real subjectivity with which the artist or viewer could potentially match wits. Each personality rents the representational screen of this picture with the deep puncture of a real being existing elsewhere, beyond the visibility of the social stereotypes presented on this painted surface.

Over on the right side, in contrast, the individual personalities tend not to hide their identities, and Courbet's letter to Champfleury gives their names. Many are childhood friends (and thus also natives to Franche-Comté) or at least acquaintances of the artist.⁴⁴ Closest to the edge, Baudelaire reads a book, while the ghostly image of his mistress, painted out at the poet's request, has resurfaced over time to look over her shoulder back at him. The next two couples further left, often referred to as the art collectors and the lovers, are not identified in the letter (though scholars, again, have leapt at the opportunity to hunt). Champfleury himself sits a bit further to the left, accompanied by a prone young boy on the floor below him, sketching. Behind the novelist in a circle of three stand, right to left, journalist and Charles Fourier sympathizer Max Buchon, hunting companion Urbain Cuenot, and leftist political philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (about whom more later). Finally, farthest left, collector Alfred Bruyas and violinist Alphonse Promayet, with fiddle in hand, fill out the group. Whereas the social types at the left side of the canvas dissimulate individual identities, at the right side individual identities hint at social types; the friends embody different forms of writing—journalism, prose, and poetry—or of the arts—music, drawing, and . . . painting. Painting also? Yes, for the central figure of Courbet not only portrays himself but also, brush in hand and canvas before him, personifies his activity. The nude model positioned between the painter and the other men of letters and arts exemplifies the resulting double direction of signification within this real allegory, leftward and rightward; either behind the muse lurks the real individual of the hired model (here nameless but undoubtedly nameable at the time), or behind the individual model lies the allegory of the muse (suggested but not made fully manifest on the surface). In either direction, the picture has rents, psychological or semiotic breaches that appear wherever a visible and present body stands in for a person or type absent but evoked.

Once all these holes of representational depth populate *The Painter's Studio*, the sheer proliferation of points of reentrance—both allegories to decipher and real wits with which to match one's own—might strike a viewer as disturbingly unorganized, without a guiding structure. This

44. Biographies of the individuals appear in Nicolson, *Courbet*, pp. 40–60.



M. Courbet dans toute la gloire de sa propre individualité, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sa vie artistique. (Voir le programme, où il prouve victorieusement qu'il n'a jamais eu de maître... de perspective.

FIGURE 7. Quillenbois [Charles-Marie de Sarcus], "M. Courbet in All the Glory of His Own Individuality. . .," *L'Illustration*, 21 July 1855. Reproduced in *Courbet selon les caricatures et les images*, ed. Charles Léger (Paris, 1920), p. 28.

would seem to be the reaction of Quillenbois, whose compositionally conservative caricature strives to reduce the number of major characters in *The Painter's Studio* to a manageable number (fig. 7). Quillenbois's disposition of figures, with a painter henpecked by his model as primary vignette, a hirsute Champfleury and cigarette-smoking *bohémienne* to the right of secondary importance, and capped man and viewing child to the left in tertiary rank, wants to order and prioritize actors in a manner reminiscent of academic history painting. But Courbet's painting itself does no such thing. With only a minor diminution of some figures to comply with the weak demands of spatial recession in a shallow room, everyone portrayed here is of the same magnitude in size; the picture is close to a frieze. The model and, to a lesser extent, the central Courbet receive a bit more highlighting than the rest (the caricature picks up on that lesser extent and accordingly lets the woman dominate over the artist), but bared flesh accounts for most of that differential treatment, and otherwise no one across the full canvas benefits much from emphasis conferred by either hue or tone. No bright blues or reds, for instance, designate the principal personae in the traditional manner.

In a typical academic history painting, either the artist who makes the painting (Charles Le Brun, say, or Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres) or the

hero of the featured action (Alexander or Homer) can bear responsibility for bestowing order—aesthetic or political; that's the active metaphor—on the depicted scene. In *The Painter's Studio*, neither such subject, who both happen to be Courbet, deliver. The real Courbet, creator of this enormous canvas, punctuates the bottom half of this mostly flat field with relatively commensurate and evenly distributed representational rents while neither relating the three major groups to one another nor providing compositional guidance within any one of them (except, weakly, the middle cluster). He doesn't even give us the consistency of isotropic space to unite the field; the handful of orthogonals along the right edge point in disparate directions, never providing the orientation of a single vanishing point. Champfleury grasped the essence when he quipped, "*The Painter's Studio* . . . is not one painting, but ten paintings."⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the depicted Courbet is so caught up in his relatively small landscape that he ignores the rest of the world crowding into his studio. Herding would have this Courbet perpetuating a tradition of pictures showing artist meeting political leader within the studio, thereby casting *The Painter's Studio* as "an *adhortatio ad principem*, an exhortation to the ruler" (C, p. 57). But this hardly seems right; the man with dogs, even if he is recognized as Napoleon III, and the central painter remain oblivious to each other's presence. This depicted Courbet, no more than the author of the full work, gives no indication of striving to exert controlling or unifying force over the large canvas's field of representation. No "great man," no "divine artist" poses or paints here.⁴⁶

Or, for that matter, no "great man" looks on. With academic painting, the political leader commissioning the work (Le Brun's Louis XIV, say, or Ingres's Charles X) could also be regarded, sometimes even by analogy between ruler and depicted hero, as the authority insuring coherence and order, imposing it on the world from his position of omnipotent transcen-

45. Jules François Felix Fleury-Husson Champfleury, *Grandes Figures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui: Balzac, Gérard de Nerval, Wagner, Courbet* (Paris, 1861), p. 258.

46. Although Herding claims that Courbet's exhortation exhibits "concreteness," the program he outlines (another Borgesian list) fails to convince owing to its disparate and arbitrary nature; the "mother in rags" reminds Napoleon of his "promise to abolish poverty"; a "dagger pointed toward the emperor" warns him of the need to pursue "peace"; "hope" is "embodied in nature," and so forth (C, pp. 57, 62). In essence, Herding is caught between two antithetical positions, articulated in the title of his essay on the late landscapes, "Equality and Authority in Courbet's Landscape Painting": either *The Painter's Studio* manifests the former or serves as a vehicle for the latter. The impossibility of the choice leaves him twisting between contradictory propositions; he claims both that "Courbet made himself the fulcrum around which everything revolves" (without providing any account of what might qualify as a pictorial sign of any such revolving about the center) and that "Courbet has relinquished . . . hierarchy by depicting a number of authorities all of whom have equal compositional rank" (C, pp. 56, 61).

dence. Yet just as Courbet shifts the act of painting from outside to inside the scene, so too viewing, as personified by the little boy looking toward the depicted Courbet's landscape, is fully within the game of the studio. Like the depicted Courbet, he focuses his attention only on the landscape rather than taking in the full gathering. Like the depicted Courbet, he too is only one player, one reentrant point among many. The activity of viewing, like that of painting, does not precede the formation of the scene, nor does it encompass it all at the end of the process through means of a commanding omniscience. Rather, it emerges in unpredictable ways as viewers—the depicted one and the actual one alike—interact with the chaotic field and its collection of anomalous rents spreading across *The Painter's Studio*.

If this gathering of individuals and types fails to perform like proper vassals following the commands of a directing authority, how do they behave? Like the deer in *The Roe Deer's Retreat in Winter* (to which I have already been alluding), they wander into the relative uniform chaos of this sylvan clearing as so many reentrant points of higher organization, thereby distinguishing themselves from their setting but, in formal terms at least, not much one from the other. Describing the creatures in that manner suggests an even more apt analogy: Courbet's assembled characters in *The Painter's Studio* behave like (dare I say it? represent) brushstrokes. There are a few moments in *The Painter's Studio* where loose technique makes a splash in the manner of the waves crashing in *The Waterspout*, *Etretat* (most notably, in the thick pile of white pigment on the depicted artist's palette tipped outwards toward us, which does not represent paint on a surface, but rather *is* paint on a surface), but for the most part the enormous size of this work and the relative uniformity of treatment across most of it tend to rob painting technique here of the capacity it has in smaller works to represent anomalous reentrance. Rather, the visitors to the studio manage to distribute themselves, in the emergent manner of such things in both nature and painting, with the same general texture of regularity and exception that we witnessed in the scenes of winter forest and tempestuous sea. Order is not imposed from above; it self-generates from below. In essence, the entire social world of Courbet's cast of characters, including the activities of painting and of viewing painting, is squeezed between the plane of nature, in the form of the background landscape, and the plane of painting, as made manifest by the actual surface of *The Painter's Studio*. (Squeezed but not squeezed flat—all three still have their rents.) And to the extent that those two planes are selfsame, that the actual Courbet utterly fails to hold them apart through a credible fiction of recessionary space, society also be-

comes indistinguishable from nature and painting, made equivalent to these two entities which are already equivalent to each other.

"On the right are the shareholders [*actionnaires*], that is, friends, workers, devotees of the art world," explained Courbet in the letter to Champfleury ("L," p. 131). *Actionnaires*: a curious word to describe one's supporters and mates. With it the artist does not position himself as the autocrat either of this particular coterie or of his own artistic enterprise. Rather, the friends take the action of investing something in Courbet, presumably with the expectation of some return. The social circle operates according to the dynamics of a market, with winners and losers emerging in the play of the game. With *The Painter's Studio*, moreover, Courbet engaged in a major speculation of his own.⁴⁷ In 1855 the regular salon was, by imperial decree, to be held as a World Exhibition of Fine Arts in conjunction with the World Exhibition of Industry, the second *Exposition Universelle* mounted in the French capital. Napoleon III's Director of Fine Arts Alfred-Emilien Nieuwerkerke approached Courbet in 1853 about contributing to the exhibition and receiving a government commission, but the artist rebuffed him "because [*Nieuwerkerke*] was stating to me that he was a government and because I did not feel that I was in any way a part of that government."⁴⁸ Instead, following the jury's rejection of *The Painter's Studio* (probably owing to its impossible size), Courbet funded his own Pavillon du Réalisme, across from the official Palais des Beaux-Arts, in which he exhibited thirty-nine paintings and four drawings, with *The Painter's Studio* as the featured work. The initiative was a commercial disaster; Courbet failed to cover his costs despite repeatedly lowering the admission fee to attract more visitors. Nonetheless, the artist stood on principle: art was to achieve success not by receiving an official stamp of approval from above but rather by soliciting support from the collectivity of players in the art market below.⁴⁹

Listen, finally, to the anarcho-socialist political ideas of Proudhon, Courbet's friend who figures among the *actionnaires* at the right side of *The Painter's Studio*:

What is the *Social Contract*? Is it an agreement between citizen and government? No. . . . The social contract is an agreement between man and man, from which what we call society must emerge. . . .

47. Herding relates the tale in C, pp. 50–55; Cars describes the Pavillon du Réalisme in his "The Painter's Studio," p. 220.

48. Courbet, letter to Bruyas, [Oct. (?) 1853], *The Letters of Gustave Courbet*, p. 115.

49. Thus, while I would agree with Herding that "the material and ideological conditions represented by the World Fair project were constitutive for the genesis of *The Painter's Studio*," we would tend to argue so for opposing reasons: Herding because the occasion provided Courbet an opportunity to exhort imperial authority, and I because it allowed him summarily to reject it (C, p. 55).

It is the relationship between the different parts that produces power in society and is the reality of the society itself. . . .

Business transactions and exchange alone produce the social order. In these conditions each man could call himself his own master, which is the very opposite of constitutional monarchy. . . .

When politics and home life have become one and the same thing, . . . society's laws will operate by themselves through universal spontaneity, and they will not have to be ordered or controlled.⁵⁰

It isn't as if society as Proudhon envisioned it lacks order. Rather, it replaces order imposed from above with order emerging from below. With all actors reacting to their own local conditions—"the reasons of the citizen . . . are always more or less specific and individual" (SWP, pp. 101–2)—each establishes proximate relationships with other actors. With time, larger structures of social organization spontaneously self-generate. The imposition of a single autocratic will, "dynastic, aristocratic, or clerical," distorts the natural course of this "collective reason" (SWP, pp. 101, 121).

If Proudhon was describing the true character of social interaction, if Courbet was justified in receiving validation not from imperial approval but through the forces of the free art market, then, in *The Painter's Studio*, the artist has once again sought out some aspect of the material world that he can represent without trickery because the characteristics of that world resemble the physical properties of paint. Just as *The Waterspout*, *Etretat* selects those aspects of cliff, water, and sky that correspond to the characteristics of paint on canvas, just as *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter* discerns and echoes the forest's juxtaposition of anomalous reentrance against the chaotic screen, so too *The Painter's Studio* disposes its figures in such a way as to recapitulate society's tendency—and nature's, and painting's—to manifest moments of higher organization that spontaneously emerge from the ambient noise of constant local interactions.

Let us be clear about what is not happening here. *The Painter's Studio* is not an allegory of Proudhon's politics. Proudhon does not provide the master key waiting to unlock the meaning of this painting. An allegory requires an authority governing the production or reception of meaning, and neither Courbet's approach to painting nor Proudhon's to politics allows a place for the "occult, mystic power" (Proudhon's words) of such a "sovereign" (SWP, p. 100). The concept contained within Courbet's subtitle of *Real Allegory* acti-

50. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, trans. Elizabeth Fraser, ed. Steward Edwards (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), pp. 96, 113, 91, and 92; hereafter abbreviated SWP. The passages are taken from publications ranging in date from 1851 to 1864; I have rearranged them into chronological order.

vates a process, punching out semiotic depth across the picture rather than underwriting a determinate meaning. In this regard, Courbet's painting and Proudhon's politics are actually both fundamentally antiallegorical, and yet neither of them thereby reduces image or society down to a field of flat uniformity. The painting is also antirealist, in that it never pretends to make the world fully visible on its surface. Courbet's painting and Proudhon's politics do not allegorize each other; nor does resemblance between painting and politics here operate in any strong, iconic manner (by both being flat, for instance). They are similar to each other only in the sense in which the first strands of life resemble a hunter or a deer resembles an econometric model. They constitute a match not so much between parallel formal structures as between parallel processes of emergence—and the matchmaker himself can only act as one more player in this undetermined game.

So perhaps, in the end, the Courbet depicted working on his canvas actually is portraying the scene lying before his eyes within the studio before him: not its specific content—which may not much matter and lies deep within the picture beyond the reach of scholarship if it exists at all—but its general texture and its dynamic of emergence. The picture-within-a-picture actually seems to merge *The Waterspout*, *Etretat* and *The Roe Deer's Shelter in Winter*, for it places a splash of water, at lower left, within the relatively uniform chaos of a forest landscape. Could there be any better way to represent the rent of individuals as they populate this social scene? Really, *The Painter's Studio* is not an ambitious work by the standards laid down by history painting. It does not aspire to dissimulate and then triumphantly reveal a big meaning. Neither does it wear its meaning on its sleeve, in the manner of realism. Trying to determine whether *The Painter's Studio* is allegorical or realist is thus to confront the picture with the wrong question. Courbet's canvas no more awaits the decipherment of its allegory than life has a meaning or markets are directed toward an end. But to say that is not to reduce *The Painter's Studio* down to a field of uniform brushstrokes (or “equal” elements, to reactivate the facile political metaphor) any more than it is to regard life as just so many organic molecules or markets as simply the sum total of its individual participants' greed and fear. With the painting forging an approach that both splits the difference between and eschews altogether the stark alternatives laid down by this tired dichotomy pitting allegory against realism, the artist and viewer alike can only embark on the uncertainty of the hunt after quarry neither fully present nor irrevocably absent. Like the late landscapes, *The Painter's Studio* operates by the logic of the multiplicity of brushstrokes incommensurate with what they depict, even if brushstrokes themselves don't play much of a role here. The picture allows society, like nature, like the artistic persona of Courbet, like painting itself, to emerge.